

Spinal manipulation – No better than other treatments for chronic low back pain

Low back pain is a prevalent and disabling disorder. Spinal manipulation therapy is widely used to treat this condition and has a prominent role in all national guidelines on the management of back pain, although guideline recommendations vary. While this therapy has been studied in many randomized clinical trials, it has produced conflicting results, and previous studies have compared spinal manipulation with a combination of therapies rather than with individual therapies. The aim of this study was to directly compare spinal manipulative therapy with other individual therapies, including 1) sham therapy, 2) conventional general practitioner care and analgesics, 3) physical therapy and exercise, 4) treatments considered to lack benefit or to be harmful (i.e., traction, bed rest, topical gel, corset), and 5) back school (treatments that did not conventionally fit into any other group).

Through a literature review, researchers analyzed information from 53 articles on 38 studies and assessed acute or chronic pain, short-term and long-term pain, as well as function. Studies included in the literature review were limited to the following criteria: adult patients with low back pain, regardless of radiation pattern; comparison of manipulation or mobilization for low back pain with another treatment or control; inclusion of at least one clinically relevant outcome measure (i.e., pain, global movement); follow-up occurred for at least 1 day; and the study was published as a full report before January, 2001.

Findings from this study show that compared with other advocated therapies for low back pain – including analgesics, physical therapy, exercises, or back school – spinal manipulative therapy had neither statistically nor clinically significant benefits. Spinal manipulative therapy had benefits only when compared with either sham manipulation or therapies judged to be ineffective or even harmful. Thus, while some patients with low back pain may prefer spinal manipulation to traditional therapies, there is no evidence that it will result in better outcomes. Because chronic low back pain is a painful burden for the sufferer and a high cost to society due to loss of work and substantial healthcare expenses, these results are important to clinicians as well as health care policy makers.

Assendelft WJ, Morton SC, Yu EI, Suttorp MJ, Shekelle PG. *Spinal manipulative therapy for low back pain. A meta-analysis of effectiveness relative to other therapies.* Annals of Internal Medicine. 2003 Jun 3;138(11):871-81. Review. Also, Summary for patients in: Ann Intern Med. 2003 Jun 3;138(11):I33.

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